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4. EASTERNMOST LIMIT OF THE RANGE OF BLACKBUCK *ANTILOPE CERVICAPRA* (L.) WITH HISTORIC RECORDS FROM ASSAM AND NORTH BENGAL, INDIA

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The Blackbuck *Antelope cervicapra* (L.) is an endemic antelope of the Indian subcontinent (Prater 1980; Menon 2003). It occurs in the grasslands and grass-scrub covered countryside amidst cultivations. Outside India, small numbers occur in Nepal and Pakistan (Roberts 1997). There is historic record from western Bangladesh (Asmat 2001). Being an animal of relatively drier opener plains, it apparently does not occur in high rainfall and densely forested areas of the Western Ghats, North-east India and the Himalayas.

Currently, the eastern range of the Blackbuck includes parts of Orissa and Jharkhand, may be lower parts of West Bengal too. Tikadar (1983) mentioned Chilka lake in Orissa as its eastern limit. Prater (1980) did not mention anything specific about its eastern range. Corbet and Hill (1992) mentioned West Bengal as the eastern range. Lydekker (1907) mentioned that Blackbuck extends to 'Lower Assam', but did not mention any specific locality. I here report the past occurrence of the Blackbuck, as far east as Assam, and also fix its easternmost limit of distribution.

The 'Raja' (landlord) of Gouripur, late Prabhat Chandra Barua in Assam's Dhubri district had shot a number of Blackbucks with his royal friends at different places, including

Dholpur in present Rajasthan. He maintained his hunting records meticulously, most of which are still in good condition. In his records, there is a mention of shooting a Blackbuck from Jhalupara, near Sonahat (south-west of Golokganj near present India-Bangladesh border) in Assam's Dhubri district on January 13, 1915 (c. 26° 6' N; 89° 48' E). There were also past records from the banks of Manas river in western Assam by Pollock while a male obtained by F. Jenkins has been mentioned from 'Doon of Assam', which were mentioned by Sclater (1891). The 'Doon' of Assam is the *duar* region of undivided Goalpara district (now falling in Kokrajhar and Chirang districts). The banks of Manas (by Pollock in Sclater 1891) are likely to be somewhere in the Panbari range of Manas National Park or just south of it in present Chirang district.

In northern West Bengal, although Agrawal *et al.* (1992) did not mention any past occurrence, there are several records in the hunting accounts of 1908 of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar. This excellent hunting report not only provided important easterly records of Blackbuck, but also records of several other species. The Maharaja and his hunting parties, which also comprised of top British officials, had their

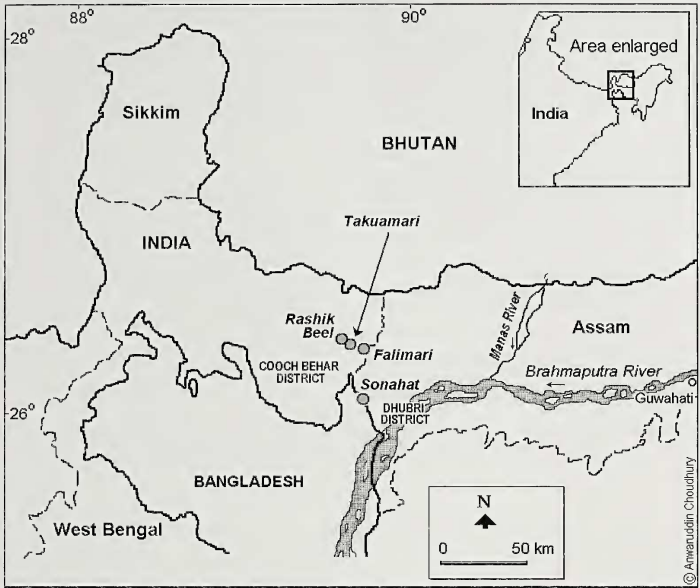


Fig. 1: Map showing the easternmost sites of confirmed shooting (●) of the Blackbuck in north Bengal and West Assam. The rivers Brahmaputra and Manas marked the eastern limit (latter being the easternmost)

shooting in present day Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts of northern West Bengal and Kokrajhar, Chirang, Dhubri, Barpeta and Baksa districts of western Assam. The party had shot 7 Blackbucks in 1871, 2 in 1873, 1 each in 1877 and 1880, 3 in 1882, 2 each in 1883 and 1884 (2 shot near Rashik beel, Cooch Behar district on 31st March), 1 each in 1887 and 1888, 2 in 1889, 1 in 1890, 4 in 1891, 2 in February-March 1892, and 2 in 1896 (one on 27th March near Garad Haut, probably in Jalpaiguri district). Although many sites of shooting were not mentioned, two, i.e. Falimari (Phalimari) and Takuamari could be found in his account. Both these sites are located north of Boxirhat area in Tufanganj area near Assam-Bengal border (c. 26° 23' N; 89° 46' E; Rashik beel, Falimari and Takuamari are located around this coordinate). No Blackbucks were shot between 1897 and the end of his report in 1907, indicating its decline in the area. Its rarity in the area is also evident from the fact that only 31 Blackbucks

were shot against 318 Swamp Deer or Barasingha *Cervus duvaucelii*, 296 Hog Deer *Axis porcinus* and 259 Sambar *Cervus unicolor* between 1871 and 1907.

In Bangladesh, Hunter (1876) had mentioned occurrence of 'Common' antelope in Rangpur. The site in Dhubri, Assam, i.e. Sonahat is near the border of undivided Rangpur district (now Kurigram district). On the Bangladesh side also, the area is known as Sonahat.

The above records show that the Blackbuck occurred up to lower Brahmaputra plains covering parts of western Assam till the turn of 19th century. Being its eastern extremity, it was very rare, especially in Assam. In case of north Bengal and northern Bangladesh (undivided Rangpur and Dinajpur districts), it was definitely present in small numbers till hunted out. Farther east, up to the Manas river, it was probably stray. The records by the Raja of Gouripur and the Maharaja of Cooch Behar also corroborate Pollock and F. Jenkins (in

Sclater 1891) and Lydekker (1907). Thus, it could be safely assumed that the Brahmaputra (precisely, its major tributary, the Jamuna in Bangladesh) and one of its major tributary, the Manas river marked the eastern limit of the distribution of the Blackbuck in the recent past, while the Manas river in Assam was the easternmost (c. 90° 54' E) (Fig.1).

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5. RANGE EXTENSION OF THE MOUNTAIN HAWK-EAGLE *NISAETUS* (= *SPIZAETUS*) *NIPALENSIS* TO UTTAR KANARA DISTRICT IN NORTHERN KARNATAKA, INDIA

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The Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Nisaetus* (= *Spizaetus*) *nipalensis* has two races in India, namely *nipalensis* Hodgson 1836, and *kelaarti* Legge 1878 (Ali and Ripley 1987; Naoroji 2006). *N.n. nipalensis* is recorded from northern India to north-eastern Hill states and eastern Himalayas. The other race, *kelaarti* has been observed in the Western Ghats from Kerala to central Karnataka (Grimmett *et al.* 1999; Rasmussen and Anderton 2005; Naoroji 2006).

Narnali village (15° 19' N; 74° 78' E) in Haliyal taluka located in Uttar Kanara District, northern Karnataka, has a small percolation tank on the village boundary surrounded by degraded semi-evergreen forests. In January 2010, we spotted the Mountain Hawk-Eagle sitting on a *Terminalia*

tomentosa tree at a height of 20 m. The bird was sitting there for 30 minutes unmindful of human activity around it. We saw the Eagle at the same location for two consecutive days.

Naoroji (2006) mentions his own observation of *N.n. kelaarti* near villages and disturbed forests in contrast with reports of this species requiring mature forests (Naoroji 2006).

The northernmost record of *N.n. kelaarti* is from Baba Budan hills in Chikmagalur district of Karnataka (Naoroji 2006). This sighting extends its range to Uttar Kanara district in northern Karnataka. Our observation also indicates that *N.n. kelaarti* can be seen near human habitations and degraded forests as mentioned by Naoroji (2006).

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